



## ***ETHICAL DECISIONMAKING FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLANS***

David Schultz, Professor Hamline University  
Editor, Journal of Public Affairs Education (JPAE)  
Hamline University

Constructing a comprehensive plan is one of the most important tasks a local government performs. In addition to being legally mandated, a comp plan is an important blueprint or vision regarding where a local government and its people want to go. It represents a cooperative dialogue among residents and city officials that articulates the important values of the community. The comp plan forms the basis of the zoning ordinance, but it is more than that. It states and defines how a community will envision economic development and the ways and places people will live, how, and where they choose to work, recreate, and shop. Comp plans have a major impact on the quality of life in a community, deserving serious attention to make sure they are done correctly.

There are many ways to go about doing comp plans. As a former city director of code enforcement, zoning, and planning and then as a housing and economic planner, I have participated in preparing them. As someone who has taught classes on planning and government ethics and advised local governments on ethics, I have thought about some of the ethical issues connected to planning. There are several good ethical best practices that local governments should aspire to follow when doing comprehensive planning.

- ***Treat the public as customers, citizens, and partners in the planning process.*** Too often the comp plan process treats the public as if they were a nuisance or a hurdle to get beyond. This is the wrong approach. A city or community is its people and planners ultimately work for them. Government and planning are supposed to be for the benefit of the people we serve. But in serving them the public occupies three roles. We should treat them as customers, providing them good service in the way that good businesses do. This means responding to questions and needs. The public is also our boss—we are there to serve them, to act on behalf of their best interests. Finally, they are partners. Doing a comp plan is a cooperative process where we are working with public to solve problems and design solutions.
- ***Listen.*** Benjamin Barber was a professor of mine who once wrote that we live in a noisy democracy where everyone talks and no one listens. How true. A good comp plan process does encourage lots of people to talk, but it also means that we should listen to what the public says and our job should also be to facilitate listening among the public. Lots of people and groups have good ideas and the planning process to a large degree is getting public to share ideas, reach consensus, and create a vision all can feel proud of.
- ***Listen not just to the squeaky wheels but to the silent voices.*** The easiest thing to do in the comp planning process is simply listen to those who shout the loudest or show up at hearings. But often these are angry people who are not necessarily representative of all the public. Hearings and meetings favor certain people excluding others. Planners need to reach out to silent people, to people of color, the poor, the elderly, those who are ill or with care giving responsibilities to provide opportunities for them to have a voice.
- ***Be creative.*** Soliciting input and devising solutions should be creative and fun. Look for non-traditional ways to engage the public. Websites are good, so are Facebook and Twitter. But don't overlook other creative options. One of my all-time favorites was giving away disposable cameras to people to take pictures of what they liked or disliked in their city and to say why. This was a creative way to engage residents who had great ideas but otherwise were not the typical attend a meeting or hearing type.



- **Be honest and follow the data where ever it takes you.** Comp plans are not just about opinions and dreaming, they should also be premised on hard data and realistic assumptions. Comp plans work best when there is honesty about what the data tells you about neighborhoods, land use, or whatever. Make sure you have the courage to use what the facts tell you to help formulate visions and ideas.
- **Know where you are now.** The best way to start the comp plan process is a self-assessment of where you are now as a community. There is an adage that you cannot get to where you want to go unless you know where you are now. This is true too with planning. A good self-assessment takes stock and does inventory of what your community looks like today. It is the reality of where you are that helps define the possibilities for the future.
- **Dream but be realistic about the plan and what your community can do.** Comp plans cannot effect miracles. Not every community can be the next Silicon Valley, destination medical center, or college town. It is good to set goals for a comp plan but even with an improbable infinite amount of money it just may not be possible to completely make over a community into something it is not. Encourage those engaging in the comp plan process to dream about what the city could become, but temper that with the reality of where it is now and what resources it must change.
- **Be wary of confirmation biases.** People seek out information that confirms their pre-existing political biases and ignores that which contradicts it. We surf the web and find memes which confirm what we already know to be the truth and repost and send to others. A good comp planning process expects the unexpected. It recognizes that we learn something about our communities that we did not know. Don't dismiss contradictory viewpoints or facts because they do not line up with what you thought had to be true. The best comp plans are exercises in self-education.
- **Think big.** By thinking big it means think outside of your own community's borders. Yes, it would be great if everyone in your community, lived, worked, shopped, and recreated within its borders. But that is seldom true—we live across the Metro region if not the state. Think about how your comp plan impacts what happens in communities near you, or how it compares to what others do. What is it that makes your community the place people want to live it, work, or visit? No city is an island, so think about where yours fits into a larger scheme of things.
- **Avoid politicizing the process.** As much as planners would like to make comp plans just a rational process about the facts, it is also a political process. It is political in the sense that it is about public choices made publicly and that aspect of politics should be embraced. But avoid the darker side of politics—changing data, rules, and assumptions, for example—to appease the squeaky wheels, or caving in to personal agendas or petty desires. Planners are not just hired guns; they have many technical skills and among them should be an ethics that is first committed to helping develop a plan that is done fairly and with sufficient opportunity for all in the community to participate. Comp plans are supposed to be comprehensive, not simply a hodge-podge of private preferences. Political compromise is good, but politicizing the process is not.

Overall, a good comp planning process is an ethical one. It follows these ten rules as a guide to crafting a realistic plan for community that all can share.

